

stroyed by the profligacy of the people. The corruption of personal character under the enervating influences of luxury and ease has foreshadowed national decay and foreshadowed national life.

The increase of Christian activity must be proportionate to the increase of resource and opportunity. The mere maintenance of present standards will not suffice. Larger enterprises must be launched and larger gifts must be bestowed. God's bountiful kindness is an unmistakable call to undertake great things for God and to expect great things from him.

More than this, we are summoned to higher attainments in spiritual life during the coming year than we have made in the year now closing. The manifest bounty of God is a call for renewed and increased gratitude, while at the same time it is suited to stimulate and maintain a more robust and uncompromising faith in the Giver of all good.

Sunday School

JOHN, THE FORERUNNER OF JESUS.

January 2, 1910. Matthew 3:1-12.

GOLDEN TEXT—"The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."—Matt. 3:3.

DAILY HOME READINGS.

M.—Matt. 3:1-12.

Th.—Luke 1:1-17.

T.—Is. 40:3-11.

F.—Luke 1:57-80.

W.—Mal. 3:1-6.

S.—Matt. 11:1-19.

S.—Mark 6:14-29.

SHORTER CATECHISM.

Q. 88. What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?

A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments and prayer, all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

TOPICAL OUTLINE.

John the Baptist—

The Man;

The Message;

The Multitude;

The Messiah.

LESSON COMMENT.

About thirty years before the time of the present lesson there had been considerable stir in the land of Palestine over certain strange happenings. Of these things we have been studying at the Christmas time. Much had occurred to lead the people to believe that the time of Messiah had arrived. However, things quieted down, and while the expectation remained changes were taking place; the Roman power was being strengthened and the "coming" seemed remote. Most of those who were present and active in connection with the events of a generation ago have passed away. Those still living have only a hazy remembrance of the occurrences. Now again Jerusalem and the surrounding country is stirred; a strange prophet has appeared. The crowds flock out to Jordan to see him; and what do they find? Before them is a man clothed in rough raiment and who gives evidences of very plain living. He speaks an unusual message and tells them the expected Messiah is near at hand.

THE MAN.—Who is this man? He is the baby of thirty years ago whose coming into the world was marked with so many interesting incidents and prophecies. Look them up in the first chapter of Luke, and then, as you follow this account, see whether they are fulfilled. John might have followed his father in the priesthood and had a life of ease and pleasure. But a vision has come to him, and he has gone out from that father's house to commune, in the wilderness, with Jehovah and get the message that he is to give to the waiting world. With the deep seriousness that marked many chosen spirits of the time John protests by his manner of life and dress against the prevailing corruption and luxury of the time.

THE MESSAGE.—More important than the man is his message. To the Jewish mind the message must have been a

strange one to precede the coming of the Messiah they expected. "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," cried the strange prophet. They had expected a warning to make ready a path for the coming King, but this was not what they took Isaiah to mean. A King should have a great triumphal procession and garlands and honors, but this man is calling for a change of heart and life. But, while the tenor of the message may be surprising, its import is soon understood: the expected Kingdom is at hand and the way is open. And hither come the multitudes asking for baptism and telling of their repentance and desire for the Kingdom. Let us seek at the outset of our study of this "gospel of the Kingdom" to get a clear conception of what is meant by "the Kingdom of Heaven". The simplest definition the writer has found, and one that seems to adequately cover the matter, is that "the Kingdom is the rule of God, whether in the individual or in the community". While the conception is chiefly spiritual, the rule of God in the heart, it must not be forgotten that it has outward relations. Our conduct is outward, but is governed by the heart. The law of the Kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount, we are soon to study, and many things as to the Kingdom will become clear as we pursue that study.

THE MULTITUDE.—It was an interesting throng that lined the banks of the Jordan to see and hear the new prophet and to be baptized of him. From Jerusalem, from Galilee, from town and from country they come. Old and young, civilian and soldier, Pharisee and Sadducee, they come with eager interest. An astonishing outburst meets the Pharisees and Sadducees. Sure of their religious place and standing, they are asked some fiery questions by the Baptist. "What makes you come out here? Are you not satisfied with your righteousness?" John does not doubt their need of repentance nor their ability to do so, but requires that they give evidence of it. The subject of the baptism administered by John is so large a question as to preclude adequate treatment in the small space of these comments. In any study or discussion of it, the chief fact to be kept in mind is that we are dealing with a symbol or sign.

THE MESSIAH.—It is in his presentation of the work and character of the Messiah that John exhibits "his profound originality as a prophet". The Jews expected that the Messiah would be a Judge, but it was the Gentiles that were to be judged, and that at the end. The Talmud explains the cry of the prophetic watchman, "The morning cometh, and also the night" (Isa. 21:12), by saying, "The night is only to the nations of the world, but the morning to Israel." (Jerus. Taan. 64a, quoted by Edersheim, *Life and Times*, I. 271.)

John sets at the forefront of his message the aspect of judgment. "And even now is the axe laid unto the root of the tree; every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire." It is needless to cry, "We are Abraham's children." "He is not a Jew that is one outwardly." We do not inherit the Kingdom; we acquire it.

The message of John will be just as potent today as it was in the first century. The way into the Kingdom is the same. The world needs not sophistry, but facts. Let every preacher and teacher and religious leader cry, "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

Monroe, La.

Geo. D. Booth.

THE PALISADES.

God built these hills in barrier long,
And then he opened through them
These gates of granite, barred so strong
He only might undo them.

Through them he lets the Hudson flow
For slowly counted ages,
The while the nations fade and grow
Around the granite ledges.

—From *The Gates of the Hudson*, by William Osborn Stoddard.

It is easy to believe that in some way the inexplicable thing that occurs to the other man is right. The difficulty in understanding comes when the trouble falls upon ourselves.